

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PUBLIC AFFAIRS SECTION

TEL: 880-2-885-55-00

FAX: 880-2-9881677, 9885688

E-MAIL: DhakaPA@state.gov

WEBSITE: <http://dhaka.usembassy.gov>



CLOSING REMARKS BY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE ROBERT O. BLAKE SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP SYMPOSIUM DHAKA, BANGLADESH

DECEMBER 10, 2012

Good evening. I am so pleased to be back here to speak with you at the conclusion of this very productive event. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic participation, the Government of Bangladesh for its support, Ambassador Verveer's team for conceiving and organizing this symposium and Ambassador Mozena and the folks at our embassy here for doing so much of the heavy lifting.

The U.S. perspective

From the beginning, the Obama Administration has emphasized women's empowerment as an essential lynchpin in its global outreach strategy and a critical aspect of our foreign policy. Advancing gender equality and economically integrating women throughout the region is a key objective for the South and Central Asia Bureau that I lead and the cornerstone of our vision to build regional ties and networks.

U.S. Foreign Policy/NSR/Indo-Pacific Corridor

Let me take a moment here to speak about U.S. foreign policy in South Asia and our efforts to encourage broad regional linkages, particularly the New Silk Road and the Indo-Pacific Corridor. The strategic partnerships we have forged with countries in South Asia are a central pillar of U.S. foreign policy. We partner on a whole range of issues – civil, military, and economic – and what's more, these relationships go well beyond traditional government-to-government diplomacy. It is the people-to-people connections with the United States and within this vast region that are the most exciting development in recent years.

The New Silk Road and the Indo-Pacific Corridor will play major roles in moving this forward. In broad terms, the New Silk Road vision is a revival of the ancient Silk Road that ran through Central and South Asia, facilitating the movement of people, commerce, and ideas between Western Europe, the Middle East all the way to East Asia. Similarly, the Indo-Pacific Corridor which connects north-east India, Bangladesh and Burma and links them to the expanding economies of South-east Asia.

This regional connectivity can come to life in a new form, with economic linkages as the core component. Economic liberalization, infrastructure connections and commerce will make South and Central Asia prosper as never before. Trade amongst South Asian countries was a mere 4% of their trade with the rest of the world and accounted for only 1.5% of the region's GDP last year, making South Asia one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Think of the opportunities this presents.

The development of trade and transit links between Southeast and East Asia has been hindered for decades by the isolation of the Burmese government. However, Burma's recent political and economic opening have generated new opportunities to promote regional economic development. Coupled with the resolution of long-standing differences between India and Bangladesh and enhanced economic dialogue between the Indian and Pakistani governments, the groundswell of momentum is extremely promising.

Building alternative transportation routes to move goods more cheaply from South Asia to Southeast and East Asia would increase integration for the entire region including, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the countries of the Lower Mekong delta.

But this is not simply about material goods and fostering wealth. In addition to the economic benefits, mutual economic interdependence through trade and increased cross-border flows could be influential as a conduit to peace, especially as we prepare for the transition of forces in Afghanistan. Today, Afghanistan's neighbors and near-neighbors once again include some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. This broader region is home to over one-fifth of the world's population. That market can fuel Afghanistan's continued economic growth, new jobs, and public revenue, as well as increased private sector investment in the region for decades to come.

Let me be clear – economic integration does not mean the sacrifice of sovereignty. Consider the benefits of the economic linkages between Canada, Mexico and the U.S. Or the mutual benefits of the U.S.–German relationship since World War II – we are the best of friends today in spite of our past conflicts. The lessons are clear – the closer countries and individuals are bound together by

trade and mutual benefit, the more incentive there is to work together. These cross-border economic, political and social linkages are the answer to the future of this region. The women of South Asia, where family and community networks are strong, understand this better than anyone else. And they have an invaluable role to play not only in bringing this about, but also stand to benefit economically and socially.

Closing the Gender Gap

The reality is that women everywhere face significantly unequal circumstances. These last few days we have covered both the agony and the ecstasy – for we have learned that women in South Asia have traveled far but have much further still to go. Women still own less than 10% of SMEs in South Asia; the UN reports that 80% of working women in this region are in what is considered vulnerable employment. Yet there are more than 200 million women entrepreneurs worldwide and in many developing countries, women's incomes are growing faster than men's.

Governments, private companies, and NGOs are focusing more and more on women as the secret weapon to drive economic development. They are using the tools at their disposal to provide credit, banking and insurance services to more women.

Women's issues are being integrated into the United States' Strategic Dialogues with countries like India and Pakistan. We work bilaterally and multilaterally to ensure women's voices are heard in emerging democracies and governments, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. India's requirement that women make up between 25 to 33% of local and state elected bodies and Bangladesh's commitment to women being 50% of the workforce by 2021 under the Equal Futures Partnership are noteworthy. Bangladesh's Grameen Bank and other institutions have made groundbreaking contributions in micro-credit, bringing hope to 8.3 million of its most vulnerable citizens, mostly women.

Many powerful U.S. businesses such as ExxonMobil, Coca Cola, Goldman Sachs, and Ernst & Young have embraced the idea of women's empowerment with training programs like "5 by 20", "10,000 women" and "Winning Women". We need more companies, regionally and internationally, to commit to harnessing the economic power that women can bring to the equation.

Beyond governments and the private sector, there is much that we as individuals can do to advance the cause of women. I encourage all of you to reflect on what you can do to put words and ideas into action. The first step is to participate – speak up and be a voice for inclusion; build and leverage your connections; and take leadership roles in the political arena. India, Pakistan,

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have had women Prime Ministers, but we need the average woman to be a much more active partner in the economic and political conversations in her country.

Deliverables and outcomes

For our part, we intend for this conference to be more than a one-off event, but rather a launching platform for a range of initiatives. The State Department will be offering women entrepreneurs from the region the opportunity to participate in exchange programs which will connect them to their American counterparts and create lasting business relationships. We are also working with the UK's Cherie Blair Foundation for Women to connect women like you to global mentors through their Mentoring Women in Business initiative. My bureau is also planning follow-on support by providing a grant to the Asia Foundation, which will establish training and networking platforms and a small grants program to and connect women's business associations and promote women's entrepreneurship across the region.

The U.S. is committed to seeing this initiative and network flourish; however, for it to truly succeed, each and every one of you must assume ownership. The ripple effect will change long-entrenched resistance by helping women take charge of their own destinies. Believe this if nothing else – by achieving what you have accomplished over your lifetimes, by breaking down barriers and moving the ball ever closer to the goal, you are changing not just your life and the lives of those in your immediate circle but the lives of girls who are not even born yet.

Together, we can alter the dynamic. It will not happen overnight but with perseverance, it will come.

Closing Comments

Remember that you do not stand alone. Remember that your voices and your perspectives need to be heard in policy discussions in the village panchayats, the town councils, the city, state and national governments. Remember that in taking charge of your economic destiny, you bring women, individually and collectively, a step closer to taking their rightful place in society. Remember, too, that we are with you every step of the way in building this foundation, brick by brick, network by network. Thank you very much.

=====

GR/ 2012